

SOMEBODY DIED

He sat upright from his deep sleep and his eyes were bulging. It was two o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, February, 1977, in Kansas, raining nails. The blinds were drawn, the room so dark he could only see the vague rising form of the antique armoire he had sanded and stained in the garage soon after he moved his family into the house. The woman with whom he had finished having sexual relations an hour before rolled towards him from the depth of her somnolence and asked, "What is it, Jack?"

Jack pressed his index finger perpendicular to his lips and made a "Shhhh!" sound.

The woman, he knew, hated being silenced. The sound perturbed her more than being told point blank to shut up.

"Not even God shishes me, Jack," she said.

He didn't have the energy at the moment to worry about how she felt, explain or apologize. He and the young woman had sipped Bloody Mary's, mostly bloody, while he cooked them a breakfast of scrambled eggs, spicy patty sausage, fried potatoes, and whole wheat toast slathered with real butter and grape jelly, a ritual he performed every Sunday morning even when he only cooked for himself. She figured it reminded him of Sunday mornings in his childhood, a time he never discussed. After they ate, they made love for a second time, then rolled apart and immediately dissipated into the warmth of the sheets.

"Ah, sinking into the sexual bathtub," she whispered as she eased her body into the mattress and pulled the covers up to her chin.

Sitting there, Jack turned his ear as if to the wind. He swore he had heard a shout, a sudden sound as in a hollow metallic chamber, loud, quick, like the report of a rifle. The shout sounded like, "What!" or a word close to it. "What!" Just once. Or maybe it was his name, "Jack?" When he heard it, his heart stopped, then raced nearly out of control, slowed he felt, just in time. The shout came with an echo, passing through his skull with the swishhh of a comet. His brain now seemed opened to a vast space above him, raw and exposed to the atmosphere. Whatever it was, something passed through,

passed through so fast he could not hold on to or comprehend it. A release from within, the ping of a bow string, a shout, a question or maybe the sound of surprise. "What!"

He squinted to identify it, mumbled incoherently to himself as he did.

"Wake up, you silly," the woman said, sitting up, poking him all over with her long, painted nails. She tousled his curly brown hair and pinched his naked behind until he flinched. He mumbled again and she laid her head back on her pillow to watch him. He looked goofy sitting up so suddenly like that, naked, arms around his knees, head dipping between them, hair hanging over his eyes.

"Come on, rough rider. Time to get real. You've been dreaming. I heard you snoring."

Slowly, he began to wake, groggy from the eye openers, big meal and their orgasms. She smiled and turned to look him in the face, to get a glimpse of his eyes. His tell all, say nothing, eyes.

A shout, he thought, passing through. Sounded like, "What!" Or "Jack!" A single loud shout. He could feel his hands shaking slightly. He swallowed to gain his voice. He wasn't sure what to say but then said intently:

"I think somebody has gone and died."

She turned away, cupped her mouth into her hand to hide her laughter. What was she doing here anyway with this guy? He was just some clod who sold and fixed computers. She was a Wall Street lawyer for godsakes. A guy she met at a nightclub. Her weekend getaway. Getaway indeed. Yet for three years now Jack had been her pressure relief valve. Great looking. Fun to be with. A sex hog like herself. Her drug of choice, she told her shrink. So much so at times she resented Jack for occupying her thoughts, for being a distraction when she needed to concentrate on her work. In town for a week of depositions, she saw him for the first time at a club circled by three young women, laughing, hugging, kissing, a stand out among the other men gathered there for the Friday night after work celebration. She edged through the crowd to join them, moved in closer, invited him to dinner and by the end of the night led him to her hotel room.

"Gone and died? Oh, come on, Jack. What was the name of your high school again?"

"Dunsmore," he whispered, still staring down between his knees.

"Duncemore?"

"Ain't funny right now. Need to think."

What? You think? she thought. Her real concern was that he was going to sit around the rest of the day staring at the wall and she'd have to just lay there and watch him. She could always check into a hotel and go out later to meet up with the Sunday night last chance singles crowd in one of the bars where Jack liked to hang out. Who knows? Maybe she would get lucky, catch a worthwhile one nighter. Or she could try to hop the redeye back to New York and just relax before she went back to the office on Tuesday. Just stroll around the city or catch a movie. She felt so laid back at the moment she could barely lift her head. The thought of getting out of bed at the moment seemed beyond her strength. The rain sounded unrelenting, heavy and oppressive. She felt trapped.

If only Jack would play along, she thought, she wouldn't have to travel to see him at odd times when she could get away. Between depositions, research, office work, trials, consultations. It was too hit and miss. She wouldn't have to worry about whom Jack was bringing home in her absence or what new disease he was going to give her. It took a lot of persuading but he finally agreed to the monthly blood tests. Neither of them could handle condoms. They'd start out with one but tear it off in a heat. She had offered him a deal. Move to New York: With her contacts it would be easy to find him a job. There were plenty of flats, lofts and apartments he would like. Nightlife. Concerts. No end to it.

"Can't think about it now," Jack said. "Got this divorce to deal with. Don't you get it? I'm going to lose my house, my kids. That's all I can handle."

"Look, Jack, don't you see? It would be perfect. You said you don't ever want to get married again, right?"

"Never."

"I do. But not in the way you think. I can't marry you. Sorry, but it just wouldn't work. You wouldn't fit in. You'd hurt my career. I'm out to marry a man of means. There's two prospects I've got my eye on. No matter how hard I work I'm never going to be able to compete with the East Coast crowd. I have no credentials. A girl from Jersey

with albies for parents? I need to marry up. If the guy wants kids, I'll give him kids. I'm tired of working. I've been working my whole life. Just set me up in the Hamptons and I'll be fine. I'll put out all the sex the guy wants. But I want you too, Jack."

Jack would shake his head in disgust.

"You're sick, you know that. Terminally ill."

"Where'd you get those fancy words."

"From you. You done told me long ago. I ain't that stupid, lawyer lady. You're into making some poor rich guy a chump. Not just him but me too. Look, I ain't well educated but I got me some street smarts. I can walk into a room and eyes turn. Once I get this mess off the table, I'll do fine."

"Jack, both my mom and my dad worked themselves to the bone doing factory work. I'm a Jersey girl who's worked her way up the line. I've got some street smarts too. Anybody can see you're stuck here and you know it. You're going to lose the house and custody both. You don't have a chance. There's nothing here for you. In New York you'll have a nifty loft or apartment. What you can't afford I'll make up. Men can have their mistresses. You'll be my mister. We're perfect together. It's just that...well, you're never going to make it big. By big I mean really big. I can be up there with all those society hags and I can still have fun with you."

"That wouldn't last. What would I do? Sit around and wait for you to call? I ain't made that way."

"Jack, you could have other women and party out now and then. It wouldn't be any different than it is now. Only you'd promise to be available and stay clean. Once I'm married I could work around it. Why not give it a shot?"

"You've already said you won't give to me in writing."

"Jack, I just can't. It wouldn't be a legal contract. You couldn't enforce it anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because what we'd be doing is illegal. It would be a fraud. You can't hide an obvious affair for long. It's got to be cloak and dagger. No man like the one I'm looking for would be willing to let me make a deal like the one I'm talking about, much less put it into a contract. It has to be on the QT. The man I want to marry can find himself a pet

duck to hang on his arm anywhere in Manhattan. I would have to be the kind of woman he'd think was a sweet, lovable wife, a good mother, a smart lady who can keep it together for him on the home and social fronts both. Somebody he could be proud of."

"Fat chance."

"I'll give you a pass on that one. But spend some time on it. Give it a while to sink in. Look at the reality of your situation and think about what I'm offering. It would be a new life, Jack. Look, you can always walk away from it. You'd be set up. You could move on from there. If you went sour on me, sure, I'd dump you, but you'd still be so much better off than you are now."

"I'd be stuck in New York. I'd be in way over my head."

"Jack, you know your way around. Think about it."

"Too much for me to think about already. Cut me some slack. I'm tied up in knots. I don't need any more pressure. Some days I feel like I'm going to crack. How would that be?"

Better than it is now, she thought then. But what did she think now? She thought she might not want to push it. She wasn't ready to give him up. She didn't want to think about any other woman having him. But she did have her limits. It was Jack, though, she really wanted. She came back to Jack's current state of mind.

She asked: "Was it one of your nightmares, Jack? About the war?"

"No. I had that one in the middle of the night. I got up and walked around a bit and then came back to bed. I thought I might have woke you up. You turned over and scrunched up some."

"Didn't hear you. Was it about that old woman?"

"It wasn't about her. It was about something else. About being chased. Shadow men. Coming out of doorways. Chasing me down alleys. That kind of dream."

"I wouldn't know."

"I heard this shout. The shout didn't sound like a dream. Sounded real."

Jack reached for a cigarette from a pack on the end table, tapped it and flicked his lighter. He took a deep drag and stared ahead. The woman — her name was Lonnie, decided to lay back down and close her eyes. She didn't want to see him go dark. She could stand him being irritable, and she could take him silly, stupid or morose. But she

could not handle him going dark. His eyes, how cold they became. He was back over there; she knew he was. His face froze, his stare went blank. He hadn't told her much, only that he'd been trained as an assassin but was never called upon to kill like that. One night when he was falling down drunk he started to tell her about an incident in Cambodia, stopped himself, then quickly changed the subject.

She would let it rest a while. Or maybe hit the hard stuff early. She was still hacked that he kept her waiting until 9 o'clock Friday night. It was a set up for a bad time. He told her the old woman was very sick and he had to drive her to the hospital. Didn't matter. Nobody kept Lonnie Sloan waiting.

* * *

Annie Farr. She was the old woman. Jack hated Lonnie for calling her that. What did she know? She'd never be the woman that Annie Farr was, no matter what age, no matter how smart or rich she was.

But that's who he was thinking of. Annie Farr. She had phoned on Friday afternoon. He was in between calls at the office doing paper work. He could tell by her voice it was serious this time.

"Jack," she said. Her voice was not a whisper. It was a throat loaded with rock. "Jack, you have to come. I have to go to the hospital."

He felt trapped. Annie never admitted outright that she needed help. He knew Lonnie would be at his house in the next few hours. He was looking forward to a carefree weekend. He just wanted to play. After a long pause and a look at the wall clock he said:

"Okay Annie, if it's that bad. What about four o'clock?"

"No," she whispered. "You have to come now. I think I am going to die."

"That sounds pretty far out, Annie. You're not going to die," he said. "But I will come over. I always do when I say so."

He couldn't really afford to leave the office early. But she must be in her seventies, he thought. She'd been sick in one way or another -- a cold, the flu, a fever, a cough -- for over two years. She probably was as sick as she sounded.

Still, he was mad as hell driving to her apartment. She always did this to him. Called at the wrong time. Took advantage of him. She knew he couldn't resist

helping her. He screamed at intervals into the windshield of his car as he drove more wildly than usual through traffic. It was misting out. The weather report called for freezing rain, maybe snow.

He felt sad driving up to her apartment. It was a bit like her, once classy, now run down. When she was young and an up-and-coming career girl, there had been a doorman in the lobby, a lady at the desk, a porter and maids. Or so she said. Now it was a drab old brick building, midtown, with no air conditioning, no security, and just the remnant of a front desk with empty mail slots.

He shivered when stood in front of her door. He remembered how she was two years before. She had shingles.

"Jack," she said then, "please come help me."

She had never asked for help in a pleading voice. Jack felt obligated. But he wasn't prepared for what she asked him to do.

He went directly to her apartment and she called out for him to come in, the door was unlocked. Jack opened it and there she was, a woman in her seventies or so sitting naked from the waist up in the only easy chair in the small apartment, smiling.

"Jack," she said, "thank god you came. I have the shingles and it's in my ears and everywhere else."

Jack felt embarrassed. He hadn't been embarrassed about anything for a long time. He walked through door like he always did because he didn't know how to say no. He came in and sat on a folding chair next to her and tried not to look but he did anyway. He noticed that, although she was an old woman, her breasts and nipples seemed so young, almost girlish, and then he felt guilty because he was checking out the breasts of a sick old woman.

"Jack," she said, "I've got to put this lotion on. I can barely lift my arms. Here, you do it. Use the cotton balls," she said pointing to the opened box. She laid her head back on the chair as if ready for sleep. Jack wanted to get out of there.

He took a cotton ball and squirted it with lotion. He patted her ears, white pus bags hanging down. She jumped and cringed whenever he touched her.

"Go ahead," she said, nodding to her breasts. "It has to be done." He smoothed the lotion onto the white pus sacks and marveled again at how her nipples were as red and full as fresh raspberries.

She suffered for months afterward. She called him at work and cried it hurt so bad. There was a ringing in her ears. But by then Jack finally said no, he just couldn't take care of her anymore. He had too many other balls in the air. She told him she had to take the bus in the rain but he held his ground; he just couldn't drive her to work any more on bad weather days. Between her bout with the shingles and her call Friday night, spring had come and gone, summer, fall, then February. This time her voice was different.

"Jack," she said, "this is serious. You've just got to come."

He left the office before anyone could ask why he was leaving early or where he was going. He could sense Annie wasn't trying to lure him over for conversation or just to keep her company or hear one of her long meandering stories of her life before the Great Depression. She sounded like the dull crunch of a car wreck.

She didn't open the door when he knocked. He was furious, not at her, but at the other people in the apartment building. Why hadn't they checked on her?

She was sprawled on her one easy chair, dressed in an old robe, with her head laid back.

"Jack," she said, crying, looking up at him. She seemed so small, so old, it frightened him.

"Don't cry, Annie. It's going to be okay," he said, his mouth tasting plastic.

"Maybe I should call an ambulance," he said.

"Don't you dare. I can't possibly afford an ambulance," she said. As always, the issue with her was money. She didn't have any. That came one day as a surprise. She seemed and acted so well off. Broke or not, she wouldn't even accept Meals-On-Wheels after he had called and arranged it.

"How am I going to get you to the hospital?" he said.

"Drive me, Jack. Just give me a minute to rest up. And don't argue with me, Jack. Just do exactly what I tell you for once."

For once? he thought. *I always do what you tell me to do, Annie. Except that one time I didn't come back. I couldn't.*

"Grab that bag," she ordered. It was full of personal items. A twisted tube of toothpaste stuck out.

He slung the old cloth bag over his shoulder and stood in front of her.

"I need my coat too. Just wrap me in it. Oh me," she groaned. "I feel so bad."

"I don't know exactly how to get you downstairs," he said.

"I can't walk," she said. She had a way of turning her head to one side, imperiously, Southern Belle style.

He stood in front of her, trying to figure it out.

"The only thing I can think of doing is for me to carry you down," he said.

"Just hurry. That's all," she said weakly.

"Look. I'm going to grab you under your arms and carry you front ways. You just hold on to me and I'll carry you front ways down the steps."

"Don't you drop me, Jack," she ordered.

"I won't drop you, Annie. But you have to just relax and hold on to me."

"Don't drop me, Jack," she said. "I don't want to break any bones."

"You just hold on to me, okay?" he said.

Jack gathered Annie Farr up under her arms, the old cloth bag swinging from his shoulder. She felt as light and fragile as a silk scarf. Holding her in place with his left arm, he grabbed his black overcoat with the other and draped it over her.

Jack juggled her and the bag while opening the heavy front door of the building with its thick lock. Outside was misty and difficult, but being outside in the cold air momentarily distracted him from the reality of having an old woman clinging to his chest. Cars drove by and the people inside turned to look at them.

"Hurry," she said. "This is humiliating."

Switching hands back and forth he popped the car door open, slid her into the front seat and the bag off his arm. He locked her in with the seat belt. Not trusting that she wouldn't slump forward, he drove to the hospital with his right arm across her shoulders, letting go only when he needed both hands to turn.

It was Friday night and he could see career women and young execs heading to their happy hours and here he was driving an old woman to the hospital.

Neither of them spoke. He was angry, frustrated, and she knew it.

"Jack," she said. "Are you mad at me, Jack?"

"No, dammit," he said. "I'm not mad. But then again I am. Not at you. Just at shit in general. So don't worry about it, okay?"

He slammed on the breaks and honked at a car in front of him for turning suddenly without a signal.

"Why didn't you call me sooner?" he asked. "You didn't have to let it get this far along. If I couldn't have helped you, somebody else could. They would have sent an ambulance. You'd be in the hospital already."

She didn't say anything. Just rolled her head. Her eyeballs looked bad to him, a pale yellow, moist and filmy.

When he pulled into the parking lot of the hospital, he didn't know whether to sit by her and scream for help or run into the hospital and grab a wheelchair. Jack felt totally helpless and stupid.

"Look, Annie," he said. "You stay here and let me check this out."

He jumped from the car, slammed the door, walked through the emergency entrance and looked around. The reception area was packed. A little black boy was holding a towel full of ice over his right eye. Misery sat in every other chair. He spotted a row of wheelchairs off to one side and grabbed one.

"Can I use this?" he asked the lady behind the counter.

"What?" she shouted.

"Can I use this chair?" he asked again. The phone was ringing and the woman ignored him so he grabbed the wheelchair and pushed it through the whooshing sound of the automatic doors.

Getting Annie Farr into the wheelchair took him some time. He was sweating and huffing but felt relieved when he wheeled her back through the same automatic doors. He put her next to a row of chairs and stood in line at the admittance counter. The woman there was still talking on the phone. He looked back at Annie

Farr and saw that her head had sagged onto her chest. His stomach tightened but he didn't want to cause a scene.

The woman leaned on her desk and talked as if she was totally unaware of the human situation deteriorating in various degrees before her. Behind her nurses and orderlies scrambled back and forth. Jack thought he saw a doctor come out and disappear into a treatment room.

He walked around the line and lightly pushed aside a black man in a dark stocking hat leaning with his elbows on the countertop. He tried to talk to the woman on the phone in his most polite voice.

"Ma'am," he said, pointing backwards to Annie, "I think we have over there a lady who is dying."

The woman looked up at him sharply and snapped at him to sit down and wait his turn.

Jack shuffled the perimeter of the waiting room. His stomach kept turning and grinding. He looked over at Annie Farr and she looked to be napping. He walked in front of her to see if she was still breathing. Barely. Short bursts that yanked her head up slightly.

Jack didn't want to cause a scene. He didn't want to be noticed. But he thought Annie Farr was growing smaller in size, slinking further down in the wheelchair.

He went back to the desk.

"Ma'am," he said. "This woman out here is dying."

The woman, a nurse he could see by the pin on her collar, looked up at him defiantly.

"Everybody out there is dying," she snapped, and turned in her swivel chair away from him to continue the telephone conversation and frantically scribble notes on a medical chart.

Jack stood for moment self-consciously in the middle of the waiting room, then stomped back towards Annie and grabbed the two handles of the wheelchair. He pushed it around the chairs and torn sofas and through the people standing and

whispering in small groups, past the admittance counter and into the automatic double doors that led into the emergency room corridor.

The woman on the phone turned abruptly to give him an assassin's stare, stood up and pointed her finger at him, all the while holding the phone to her ear and simultaneously say, "What in *thee* hell do you think you're doing?"

His memory after that faded somewhat. He remembered nurses and orderlies screaming at him, tugging at the sleeves of his black overcoat and at the arms of the wheelchair. They gathered around Jack and Annie Farr shouting for security and the result was general confusion. Jack didn't argue. He wheeled her into one of the treatment rooms where a boy about fifteen or so with a bloody broken nose and a cut on his chin was moaning on a cart.

"This here is a dying person," Jack said to the young looking doctor who was checking the boy's chart. He looked back over his shoulder at Jack and at Annie Farr and said, "Shit." After that, everything fell into place. Squads of doctors, nurses, technicians and who knows what scrambled out of nowhere crowding the room.

A Code Blue was announced and Annie Farr became an instant celebrity. Jack was brushed aside. His last memory of her was the young doctor almost jumping up and down like a cheerleader shouting, "My god, this woman's dying! This woman's dying!"

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Lonnie was waiting for him when he walked into the kitchen from the garage. It was almost nine o'clock. He supposed she had been at the house for four hours or more. It was her habit to take a taxi from the airport, shower and change into a nightie and a light black and red Japanese robe. She smiled grimly but seemed soft and mellow. Probably her on third Scotch, he thought.

He still wasn't certain if he liked her or not. She wasn't really pretty, at least pretty in the way he liked: girlish, bright eyed, slightly dark skinned. At thirty or so she already seemed a bit too seasoned for him. Formal in a way, a pin striped business suit kind of career woman, taut, brisk, a little tough looking. She wasn't a date he wanted to take out dancing or to a show or anyplace where they could be seen together for long. When her ink black hair was not pulled back and bound up,

it nearly reached her waist, like an Indian woman's, straight and wiry. Sometimes she braided it or wore it in a ponytail when they went out to lunch on Saturdays. The ponytail brought out her worst features. She had a narrow pointed face that she accented with big round glasses, a grasshopper look. She had a way of pursing her mouth that put him off. But he liked her enthusiasm for going to bed with him. When they were finished, she would always lie back and smile and say, "Incredible." Some men rated women on a scale from one to ten in the looks department. Jack abided by that to some extent but he measured women more on their sexual hunger. Lonnie was definitely a nine for sexual hunger. Annie Farr often told him he was bad for women. He knew too much. He wasn't a real gentleman, she said. Too forward, too fresh, too self-confident in all the wrong ways.

"I'm tired," he told Lonnie. "Sorry about being late. No chance to call. It's a long story. Let me get undressed and pour a drink. I'll tell you all about it."

* * *

At first, he enjoyed going to see Annie Farr. Back from the war, he was broke, properly pissed, confused, unable to concentrate and not, he knew, very likeable, nor did he care to be. His job interviews didn't go well. He'd been drafted out of college after he needed to skip a semester because the money he put aside just wasn't enough. His older brother, Michael, set him up for a meeting with Annie. She operated a prestigious employment agency and headhunter firm. Michael was the family genius and Annie helped him land his first job. Now he was a wheel with a large supermarket chain and traveled the country making deals.

"That Michael came to me as green as okra," Annie told Jack more than once. She was raised on a family cotton farm in Arkansas and reminiscing came natural to her. "It was more like a plantation," she said. "I had me a negra nanny and we had maids and a gardener and hired hands. My father grew cotton and raised horses. It was like 'Gone With the Wind'."

She thought Michael was the best thing since fried chicken, "I mean real fried chicken now, the kind my mother and her negra used to fry. You've never had real fried chicken and don't tell me you have because my mother and her negra were the

last people I ever met who knew how to do it up right. This stuff you get nowadays isn't fried chicken. It's just stringy rooster remains dipped in doughnut batter."

Michael didn't know anything about business but she recognized his eagerness and drive. He started out working for a "tough old dog" as a cost accountant and just kept going to school and getting promoted until he was at the top of the heap. Now he was being wooed by every corporation west of the Mississippi, she bragged. He was top drawer, the little shit.

Saying that, she would turn her head towards Jack and away from a distant moonscape her eyes had been chasing, rearrange the stack of job seeker applications in front of her and shake her head. "But God help me, what am I going to do with you, Jack?" She'd laugh then, shaking all the rough rocks in her throat down from the asphalt of her tongue. She was a petite woman with short, thin gray hair brushed forward over her forehead. Her laughter thrashed forward as if one part of her wanted to hold it back and another part fought to let it go. Then she'd lean across her desk on her elbows looking him directly in the eyes.

"Now Jack, I've been doing a lot of thinking about you. You're as handsome as they come but the space between your ears seems to be a little lacking in substance. At least from what I can tell at the moment. I do believe your problem is that the corn is green. However," she'd say, leafing through her papers, "however, these tests I've been giving you say you might be able to work with machine repair or fix computers, that kind of thing. With a few whiskers they might even be able to whip you up into sales. You've got the looks for it. I wouldn't say you carry a look of innocence, nothing like that, but you do look to be honest. That's a plus. You've got a fine laugh when you allow yourself one and you're a talker of sorts. But what's this business about going cold on me? I want to call you up and ask, 'Jack, is that you? No? Where'd you go off to then?' "

He looked at her and shrugged. He might have had an impulse to take down any other person who talked to him like that, but Annie's southern accent and her honesty made him laugh even though she didn't seem to be trying. Annie frowned.

"I don't want to send you to a place like National Cash Register but you may not be ready yet for an IBM. I think I know just the spot. I placed the President there twenty-five years ago."

She sent him to another woman in the same building for "charm" school. Her name was Hazel Williams.

"Now ole Hazel will help you gain some class. She'll show you how to sit, how to stand, how to look people in the eye whether you want to look them in the eyes or not. To always be gracious and pick up the check. She'll help you buy a nice business suit, a good looking tie and a pair of Florsheim's. It'll be worth the money. She'll get you a big discount. She knows everybody but God. Once she says you're ready as a rooster, I'll send you to a company I've picked out for you."

Jack got the job on his fourth interview. He figured his competition might have decided to drop out. After a few months he decided it was a chickenshit outfit but he found that Annie had something else in mind for him after all. The job was more than just fixing office equipment. That was only one reason he was sent to answer customer calls and complaints. Sending men like himself was part of the company's "integrated" sales strategy, whatever that meant. His job was to be sure customers stayed in the fold and buy every new product that came along. His boss explained to him that was his job description. He mastered the game slowly but was promoted and then moved up into sales full time. He had a knack for dealing with people, especially women. If there was a people problem, Jack could usually fix it. The women, it was said by the other salesmen, liked his stride.

Annie Farr continued to call him once a week to see how he was doing and invite him to bring her some lunch. He would stop by her favorite sandwich shop and order two large barbecue beef sandwiches, pickles and French fries.

"Don't dump ketchup on the fries," she would scold. "They'll get soggy."

Usually, Jack tried being polite. Now and then Annie bummed cigarettes and chewing gum. "You've got to stop smoking menthol," she complained. "There's nothing better than a plain filtered cigarette."

She smoked cigarettes like an actress in a 1940's movie and lifted her narrow face up to release the smoke in a long, narrow stream. After the first puff, she would

let her cigarette rest in an ashtray and sit back in her old typing chair, fold one arm under the other and smile at Jack. When she did that, he knew he was in for a long session. Sometimes they lasted two hours and he had to get back to work but he didn't know how to cut her off. She was the only woman he had trouble getting away from.

Annie usually talked about one of two things, her father or politics. Her father had lost his entire fortune in the crash of 1929. His sweet little girl, educated at the Sorbonne and a small elite women's university in New York, had to find work. She had a network of friends and through them started her own employment company for professional people, a rarity during the depression.

"My father was humiliated. He never recovered. To this day I can see him, such a tall, elegant man, astride his horse, silhouetted against the house. It killed him to sell our place, just killed him. But somebody had to work. I didn't have a brother and my younger sister couldn't do anything but be a southern belle."

Every man worthy of her esteem was a tall, elegant man. Jack was tall, but not elegant yet. He had to hear her say that many times, that he needed a complete going over.

Her best story about her father was really about her uncle. One windy afternoon before the stock market crash her uncle was racing her father on horseback up a hill in back of the family vegetable garden. She watched them from her bedroom balcony. Just as her uncle reached the top of the hill, a huge bolt of lightning speared down from the sky and "pierced his soul."

"Dead on the spot," she said. "My daddy grieved and grieved. He said again and again how foolish they were, to be horseracing so close to the onset of a thunderstorm. Sounds like something you might do, Jack. Oh my dear daddy. He never forgave himself."

She was six years old then and forever feared the fickle weather of the Midwest, the thunderstorms and tornados.

Politically, Annie Farr was still fighting the Civil War. She supported the Democrats but sounded more like a Republican to Jack. But he didn't follow it enough to know. What did interest him about her politics were the famous people

she knew. Harry Truman, for one. Truman used to come right into her office and ask for advice. In the beginning, he thought she might be a little nuts. But during one such lunch at her desk he spotted a photograph of Harry Truman on the credenza right behind her chair that was signed, "To Annie Farr: What would I do without friends like you? Harry S Truman." She claimed to know the Kansas City gangster, Tom Pendergast.

"That poor man," she said. "He helped out just about everybody in this town and then they all dumped him. Moral fiber, phooey. None of the so-called city fathers had half the moral fiber he did. And Harry refused to turn his back on Tom. They fussed and threatened and pleaded with Harry, but he said, 'No, Tom was my friend and supporter then and I'll be his friend and supporter now.' That's what I call character."

She would peer at Jack over the top of her glasses. "You could use a little of that, Jack."

Annie Farr constantly lectured Jack about character. When he began having trouble with his wife, Annie sat up and got irritated with him and told him he wasn't trying hard enough. "That poor woman. Two babies back to back. Boys at that. You go back home to that house and start giving her a little support."

"Since she had the kids she's fallen in love with the refrigerator," Jack said. "All she does is eat and smoke and talk on the phone all day. My boys are crawling around in dirty diapers. I don't even know if she feeds them. She just trashes around the house in her nightgown. Some days she doesn't even comb her hair. "

"You ever beat her, Jack?" Annie asked out of the blue.

"Of course not. I may be stupid but I'm not mean."

"You're not stupid, Jack. Just a little slow getting out of the gate. But what's this divorce business all about."

It was then Jack had to admit she'd caught him running around on her. Late one night, thinking Suzanne was asleep, he made the mistake of taking a call from one of his girlfriends. Suzanne heard the whole conversation and began checking up on him, calling the office and befriending his secretary. She wrote everything down.

"Now that's trashy, Jack. I don't know how Michael can be so upright and clever, and you can be so low."

Low or not, Annie Farr continued to invite him to lunch. She laughed at just about everything he said. It irritated him.

"It's the way you say it," she would soothe him. "Tickles me."

One afternoon when he was finishing up his daily reports at the office she phoned him and asked, "Jack, could you take me grocery shopping? I'm running low."

It seemed an odd request. She'd never let Jack in on her personal life. He had seen her as self-sufficient. Before the recession that hit the country after World War II she had offices in Chicago, Dallas and Oklahoma City. There was a complimentary article about her success framed on the wall in her small reception room. After that first phone call, she dialed him at least once a week for groceries. At the check out register she always seemed short of cash and had no problem directing Jack to make up the shortfall.

"They're going to need another ten dollars, Jack," she'd motion casually towards the cashier.

One blustery November afternoon on the way to her apartment she finally turned to Jack and said in a barely audible whisper,

"Jack ... I'm uh, Jack, I'm uh ... a bit short on cash these days. Truth be told, most of the hot shots I've placed over the years have either died or retired and these young fellahs have no loyalty, no loyalty at all. They don't want to be bothered by me. These last few years I've barely been able to make my rent. I've got to keep up appearances. Business is changing so much. There's no integrity to it. Memories are no more than five minutes. I'm at wits end."

About the time Jack's wife filed for divorce he too began having trouble at work. The economy was down and he had to let some of his people go. That meant longer hours and it was difficult to get away. One afternoon after carrying her groceries up to her apartment he had to tell her that between the divorce and taking care of his boys he couldn't help her anymore. She teared up, clinched one of her

small, delicate fists, exhaled and then slowly began unloading the grocery sacks. She didn't want to hear a word about Meals-On-Wheels or any other kind of help.

"Jack," she said, "I need you to help me. I can't let my clients know I'm in dire straights. That would be the absolute and total destruction of me."

"I can't right now, Annie. I've got my own troubles. I'm going to lose this divorce and my boys and what money I have left. I've got to spend what little time I have left on myself. I'm sorry. I have nothing else to give."

He turned and hurried down the steps without looking back. He hadn't heard from her until Friday afternoon.

* * *

Lonnie had her eyes closed and Jack thought she was sleeping. He slipped out of bed to fix himself a drink. They had been drinking Bloody Marys but he switched to Scotch. He needed the real thing.

The room felt cold. He turned up the thermostat and looked out the window at the rain. It had yet to turn to sleet but the streets looked icy and bleak.

He had just settled into one of the easy chairs and was enjoying the heft of his first sip when the phone began ringing. It wasn't supposed to ring. Nobody knew he was there. He was supposed to be somewhere else. The fact that it was ringing bothered him. He made a snap decision, set his drink down on the end table and headed for the kitchen.

"What is it, Jack?" he heard Lonnie groan weakly from her sleep.

The kitchen was down a level. Many times before he had bashed and maimed the small toe of his right foot making the turn at the bottom of the steps into the kitchen. He hurriedly tiptoed down the stairway as through a minefield.

He picked up the phone just as it stopped ringing and heard the booming voice of an older man used to speaking with authority.

"Mr. Jack Roper?" he boomed.

"What?"

"Is this Mr. Jack Roper?" He boomed on the word, "Roper."

"Oh yeah, this is me."

"This is Dr. Parmalee. Dr. Stanford M. Parmalee."

"*Dr. Parmalee?*" Jack asked himself. Oh yeah, he remembered the name. Annie's doctor.

"That man," Annie told him more than once, "is so old they had to stitch his eyelids to keep them open," Annie laughed whenever she mentioned his name. "But such a tall, elegant man. A fine physician for over fifty years." Jack remembered he had given this phone number to one of the nurses at the emergency room. A mistake in the middle of all the chaos.

"Yes sir, Dr. Parmalee."

"Well, Jack. She's a-floatin' in the brine."

"What?"

"A-floatin' in the brine."

"Is she okay?"

"No son, she passed from this life at 2 p.m. today. Now she's over at the Med Center, a-floatin' in the brine. Donated her body to science, you see. We float the cadavers in formaldehyde until they're ready to cut," Dr. Parmalee explained with a small chuckle.

Jesus, Jack thought. Annie, a cadaver.

"Annie, shit!" he said aside to no one. He flashed to body bags. Heavy. The smell of army blankets, blood, body parts, splatter.

"What did she die of? I mean, what was wrong with her?" was all Jack could think to say.

"Starvation. The woman starved to death. Body ate her alive. Couldn't be helped. Sometimes old people just stop eating. Of course, I think she was financially strapped. A damned shame. Cut a fine figure in her day. Well known in these parts, a confidant of Harry Truman. As a matter of fact, Bobby Kennedy'd call on her from time to time. No doubt she was just too proud to ask for help. She was high and mighty. I should know. I hoped to date her once."

Jack let his head drop forward to touch the kitchen cabinet.

"I'm sorry she's gone," Jack said. And he was.

"Don't need to be sorry, Mr. Roper. She lived a full life. Not many people live into their ninety-third year."

"What? You mean she was ninety-three?"

The doctor laughed.

"Even caught me by surprise. Signed the death certificate myself. I thought she was a good ten years my junior. Always did look young for her age. She was a such bright, cute young woman when I first met her."

"I thought she was seventy or something," Jack said. *My god, he thought, that means she was in her eighties when he first met her.* No wonder she didn't want to take the bus on rainy days. That's why she started calling him for rides.

"Remarkable lady," the doctor said, trailing off. "Well, I got to go. I appreciate whatever help you may have given the woman."

"Thank you, sir," Jack said and hung up.

When he returned to the bedroom, Lonnie was sitting up in bed, smoking.

"I hate rainy days like this," she said. "Who was it?"

"Dr. Parmalee. Annie Farr's doctor. Annie died today at two o'clock."

He told her about her body a-floatin' in the brine.

"My god," she said. "A-floatin' in the brine. How primitive. How totally Kansas City. Did he really say that? My god."

They both laughed. They could see the old tall elegant doctor with his eyelids sewn to his eyebrows. And then they looked at each other.

"It was only a coincidence," she said abruptly, seeming angry.

"What was a coincidence?"

"You know. Your dream or whatever it was. When you sat up, it was exactly two o'clock. I caught the time out of the corner of my eye"

"It was no goddamn dream. I already told you I had my nightmare in the middle of the night. No sir, that was a shout. Right here in this room."

He stood up from the chair and sat next to her on the bed. He could feel her shaking and put his arm around her shoulder. *Something passing through the chamber above his head.* A shout. The release of a bow string. A ping.

Then he said:

"Maybe it was just a dream after all," he said, shrugging. "Who knows? How can you tell anyway sometimes if you're asleep or you're awake. In between, I

guess. Sounded like a loud handclap. A bang. Somebody letting go a shout.

Sounded like, "what!" Like that. Oh well. Doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

"All that ESP stuff is bullshit you know," she said. "I've studied the literature. Wrote a paper on it. I have a minor in experimental psychology. Just the power of suggestion. Magical thinking."

"You're right. I'm not arguing against it. I will say it sounded weird though." *Very real too*, he thought. "Sounded like, 'What!' I thought that's what I heard. Or maybe it was, 'Jack!' My name. Bang. Like a hand clap."

"All right, all right. Enough."

She lay back and rolled away so he couldn't see her face.

"Shit," she said sharply.

"What?"

"Well." She raised up slightly. "First she makes you four hours late. That pisses me off for starters. Then we're both too tired to do anything. So Friday night gets wasted. Yesterday was fun. But I wanted today to be fun too. That's why I spend the money to fly all this way. To fuck you. I want to spend the whole weekend fucking. I go for days without fucking. I work ten, fourteen hour days sometimes longer in the middle of a trial. I only drink on the weekends, you know. I work all the time. That's why I'm here. To drink and fuck. I think about you all the time. I look forward to these weekends. Then this old woman has to die on me and now..."

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm sorry about it. Give me a few minutes. I need a shower. I want to brush my teeth. Why don't you have a drink? I'll fix you one."

"No. I need a minute too. Go ahead. I need to think."

She slunk back under the covers and he grabbed his drink. *Annie Farr*, "he thought. *Ninety-three. My God*. But she wouldn't let anybody help her, not in the usual way. He replayed the shout he heard, felt his whole body sink again, the sudden sadness, the total loss of energy. His veins filling with lead.

He took his drink into the bathroom and set it on the counter. He started the shower and waited for the water to heat up, then stepped into the tub and pulled the

curtain. The water was just the way he liked it, so hot he could barely stand it. In the Nam he hadn't had a shower for a year. Each shower since then felt like a new beginning.

In the comfort of the hot water shooting over him he thought of the week to come. There was going to be a hearing about his boys. He wouldn't have Annie to bounce it off of. He wouldn't have anyone to tell him what to do. He was going to be all alone and he was going to lose this house, the house he had worked on room by room for the last three years. His own house, the only home he had ever felt was his own. He really wished Suzanne would die and then he could keep the house and the boys. He wished her dead. She had made him a promise and then broke it. She promised him a life together. She let him down, goddammit.

He was going to have to do something too about Lonnie. What she said just now, "That's why I'm here. To drink and fuck," sounded out of place, sounded wrong. That's was the deal. He knew that. They had agreed to it. It worked fine up until now. But today in the darkness and the rain it sounded harsh, cruel. The whole deal was an arrangement they made one night at the airport just before she boarded her flight. They agreed to it. She was the one who changed it. Wanted him to be her mister. And he didn't even like the way she looked. He never really did like her at all. He just liked the deal. It was easy. It was different and it worked.

He rinsed, shut the water off and stepped out of the tub reaching for a towel. He walked to the door of the bathroom as he dried himself and watched her curled on her side. Her long black cloak of hair spread heavily across the pillow. He could feel himself being surrounded by her hair, suffocating on it, inhaling it up his nostrils, choking on it in his throat, her hair spilling from her head like a thick drape blocking off the light. Her hair seemed repulsive. He wasn't sure he wanted to get back into bed with her.

He would have to talk to her about it tomorrow. But for now he also knew he needed to smell a woman's skin, to touch her breasts, to exchange raw nakedness, to feel life. That's what he dreamed about in the Nam. A woman's soft skin, her scent. He had wanted so much to have a life, to have Suzanne love him, to be with his boys. But he wasn't going to have that now. And Annie was dead.

As he moved towards Lonnie she rolled onto her stomach and turned her head to the wall. He tossed the towel on the floor and picked up his drink. He walked instead to the window and watched the rain through the blinds strike the darkening street.

* * *

Lonnie heard him moving across the room to the window. She looked away from the wall and peeked at him standing by the window. The news that the old woman died frightened her. She didn't believe in life after death. She was convinced there wasn't one. But she had seen the clock when Jack suddenly sat upright. It was two o'clock. And then the telephone call. It was just a coincidence. Nothing more. She was sure about that. It was the Bloody Marys. While Jack cooked the breakfast she kept pouring more vodka into her glass. She regretted doing that now. She felt drugged. She lay her head back down. She could feel herself falling asleep.

* * *

She felt him slide his arms under and around her and curl himself into her shape. She decided to keep focusing on the rain. If she could just focus on the rain outside the window, she would be okay. She figured it was the vodka. She kept pouring it into her drink out of fear. She had been watching him all day, those suddenly dangerous, vacant eyes. He had lied to her. He said he wasn't going to go cold on her but he had. When he hung up phone from the doctor, she could see it. He had gone dark. He was in shock, she thought. That look, a look she couldn't put words to, scared the living shit out of her.

Maybe it was the war after all. Maybe that's what war did to men. Maybe he had been shot and killed but kept walking like zombies are said to do. That's all she could figure out. She thought to sit up and unravel herself from his arms but he held her even tighter. She wanted to scream, run through the house, open the door and feel the fresh air outside the room.

She felt tears edging slowly down her cheeks. She didn't want to give him a reason to go berserk and hurt her. Or to feel superior. Either way, she decided to

lay very still and try to sleep. She didn't want Jack to have the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

* * *

Jack felt Lonnie stiffening to his touch. He could feel her tears on his hands. Her body felt cold under the blankets; he could feel her bones. She wasn't shivering from the cold. Just very still.

He thought he must have hurt her in some way. He was sorry she felt hurt. Or maybe not. It must have been something he said. What, he couldn't figure out. He was sorry for Suzanne too, for what she had done to herself, to him. Or maybe not. He was sorry for his boys. But there was nothing he could do for them now. Suzanne was going to get the house. She was going to get the boys. He would only see them on weekends, if then. Annie was dead. That might not be a bad thing. He no longer had to feel obligated to her, actually never had been, nor to Lonnie, not to any of them. Nobody could hurt him now, not the government, not Annie, not Suzanne, none of them.

He slowly untangled himself, edged off the bed and walked into the hall. He walked down the stairs into the living room. The drapes hung heavy over the windows blackening the room. It smelled stale from the breakfast he cooked. It felt like a tomb. He had to get out of there for a while. In fact, he had to get out of there fast.

Jack crept quietly back up into the bedroom and dressed as quietly as he could. He found his billfold on the dresser and walked back down to the kitchen. He lifted a leather jacket off the hook by the door and swept the island for his car keys.

The rain had turned to sleet. The streetlights shone through the slanted streaks of ice onto the pavement in a glare. The sleet muted the brightness and trailed off into the darkness as comets do. After he backed the car into the street and pointed it out of the cul-de-sac, he decided it would be a good night to drive to the club where he liked to hang out with people he had never met, people like himself who hated to have the weekends come to a close so soon, when it was time to put the children to bed and lay out clothes for the first workday of the week, a

time when it was the hardest for him to sit still.

Lonnie could take care of herself. He had no doubt she would call a taxi soon after he left. Let her go, he thought. Let her think what she wanted to think. He needed to be in a crowd of people laughing and drinking, to see the faces of women he hadn't met before who were out to flirt and loved to joke around. Women happy to see him.

He wanted to be someplace where there was music and lights flashing. He wanted to be around people who felt alive and quick with words. It was time, he guessed, to come back from the dead.